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Nothing's clear after Honduras clash

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — Basic questions about the Sandinista strike against contra bases in Honduras — including who won the fight — remain clouded more than a week later by conflicting claims about everything from body counts to battlefield movements.

Why the Sandinistas launched the risky attack, when it began, how it developed and whether, as U.S. officials say, it was the largest Nicaraguan incursion yet into Honduras figure among the unresolved questions.

In the wake of the fighting, propangandizing by Nicaraguan officials in Managua and "anonymous sources" here has muddied attempts to get at the facts. Rugged terrain and restrictions on the media in both countries made it impossible for reporters to inspect the combat site.

High-ranking rebel sources broke a 10-day silence on the bizarre incident in an interview with The Herald Monday, providing several new details. But contradictions continued.

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Laying out a version of events that contradicts both the Sandinista and U.S. accounts, the rebels claimed to have spotted Sandinista attack preparations as early as March 7. They said they set a giant ambush in the hills surrounding their Military Instruction Center, then caught Sandinistas by deadly surprise when the incursion began March 18.

U.S. officials in Washington had claimed that neither the contras nor U.S. intelligence officials had advance information of the attack. They had depicted the Nicaraguan operation as a surprise assault that began before dawn March 20 and was first fought off by hundreds of untrained contra recruits.

The rebels said they had left the teen-age trainees as "bait" in their training base, only to withdraw them to a safe rear guard as some 2,500 Nicaraguan troops advanced.

As the smoke cleared, more discrepancies emerged. U.S. officials announced a Nicaraguan mini-invasion; Nicaraguan and Honduran officials at first denied anything unusual had happened, then went on vacation.

Casualty figures differed dramatically. The rebels said their forces had killed more than 200 Sandinistas, while suffering only 40 dead and about 60 wounded.

U.S. officials backed the rebel casualty count. A source here said that, though the contras' figures appeared lopsided, it was only logical that the Sandinistas would have suffered more casualties.

For his part, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega gave an equally lopsided account, saying his troops had killed 350 contras and wounded 250 more. He conceded that 40 of his own troops had been killed, 116 wounded.

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